

Teaching Tip

Put another (B)Log on the Wire: Publishing Learning Logs as Weblogs

Christian Wagner

Department of Information Systems
City University of Hong Kong
83 Tat Chee Avenue, Kowloon, Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

The usefulness of learning logs (Baker, 2003) can be further enhanced through the use of weblogs (Barger, 1997). Weblogs are personal web pages written in chronological diary form and maintained through weblogging software. Benefits include ease of publication, sharing of results, and instructor monitoring.

Keywords: learning log, weblog, blog, wiki

1. INTRODUCTION

J. Howard Baker's Teaching Tip "The Learning Log" (Baker, 2003) in the previous issue of the *JISE* described an interesting teaching technique whereby students document their learning activities and learning results in a concurrent journal. This article explores the idea of turning learning logs into weblogs ("blogs"), which are published on the web at the time they are written, and identifies corresponding benefits. The article revisits learning log principles and gives an overview of weblogs, together with an explanation how we may use their features to strengthen the learning log technique. The article then draws conclusions and suggests possible extensions to the technique.

2. LEARNING LOG

Baker describes the learning log as a learning diary, created concurrently with the learning experience, and reporting on the learning content as well as the process (including time taken, sources used, and so forth).

The underlying goal is to have each student behave as an expert-in-the-making, whose findings can be of interest to fellow students, and whose learning progress can be easily gauged by the instructor.

Baker offers a procedure where instructors post topics on the network, with students selecting topics, and then using desktop tools such as a word processor or presentation graphics to record their findings and

learning. Students are expected to e-mail their logs periodically to the instructor.

At the end of the logging activity, student experts are expected to present their findings, undergo peer and instructor evaluation, and possibly have their logs published on the course website.

3. WEBLOGS

The term weblog (Barger, 1997), refers to a personal web page, kept by the author in reverse chronological diary form. It is a "log on the web" and a "log of the web". As a log *on* the web, it is kept first and foremost on the web, either on a static web page, or via a database backed website, enabled through "blogging" software. As a log *of* the web, it frequently refers to other Internet locations via hyper linking.

Weblogs differ from regular personal web pages largely as a result of the software used to create them. Nowadays, most authors will use a weblogging software (such as Blogger, MyPHPblog or Cafelog), which offers several features that enable publishing at "web speed" and convenient knowledge sharing. The author connects to his or her weblog via username and password, writes a new entry, and, through a single button-click publishes the result. The blogging software handles aspects such as formatting, arrangement in chronicle order, and (ftp) upload. Many blogging software implementations also allow archival of older weblog entries, search, categorization of the blog by

topic (in addition to dates), and recording of reader comments.

The result is an information and knowledge site that is easily maintained, either individually, or as a multi-person collaboration facility. The archival, search, and categorization features help in content organization and retrieval, especially when authors intend to build knowledge logs ("k-logs"). The result is an anytime and anyplace (where there is web access) publication facility which stimulates idea generation and sharing.

Weblogs are both powerful and easy to obtain. There are estimates of over 500,000 currently active blogs, now taking on an influential role even in journalism (The Week, 2003). Several blogging software providers offer their software through a no-fee application service provider (ASP) model. Authors visit the ASP's website to write their blogs, which then can either be uploaded to the authors ftp server and web server, or can be hosted at the ASP's site. When using the free services, authors should expect to find some form of (banner) advertising somewhere in the blogging process. In addition to free ASP offerings, there are also several open source weblogging software implementations available, which can be found at sites such as www.sourceforge.net.

4. LEARNING WEBLOG

As the previous discussions illustrate, weblogs offer a number of highly beneficial features for the maintenance of improved learning logs. First, students can share their results with others right from the start of the exercise, and can invite other students to visit their log site and to comment on-line. Thus, they create many opportunities for feedback and learning. Second, students can focus on content, without worrying about record keeping activities, as these are taken over by the software. Third, students learn about web page creation, idea sharing, hyper linking, and the nature of the WWW in an intuitive way. Fourth, students have the opportunity to comment and possibly jointly write a weblog, which supports group learning. Fifth, the instructor can monitor published weblogs more easily, serving as a further incentive for students to keep their logs up-to-date. Finally, there is no need for the instructor to convert student documents and publish at the end of the exercise, as it is already done. In short, instructors can enhance the best features of the learning log, offer students the added value of publication, and improve their ability to monitor learning.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

Blogs can a natural extension of learning logs, enhancing and strengthening the best features of this teaching technique, while giving students more responsibility for the learning and publishing process.

The barriers to using this technique are low, as weblog software access is easily obtained, either as a free offering from ASPs or by installing free blogging software on a local server. Academic users will likely want to host their own ftp/web server, to avoid distracting third party banner ads on learning logs.

Instructors and students who have embraced the weblog way of learning, may wonder what they can do to expand the experience. For them I recommend the use of Wikis (e.g., Leuf and Cunningham, 2001). Wikis take the process of group writing and knowledge sharing far beyond weblogs and can be a great enabler for student-centered learning. Colleagues are encouraged to explore and use them as well.

6. REFERENCES

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Christian Wagner is an Associate Professor in the Department of Information Systems at the City University of Hong Kong. His scholarly interests include the areas of knowledge management, virtual communities, and e-learning. Previously he developed a virtual university website at CityU, and managed an e-learning project that led to the development of CityU's iMBA program, Asia's top ranked distance MBA (AsiaWeek, 2000). Wagner is the author of over 40 published manuscripts, with several articles on virtual learning, knowledge management, and learning with game software.





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ISSN 1055-3096